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## **CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESSES IN AFRICA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article draws from some theoretical and practical issues that emerge with connection to democracy and civil society in exploring democratization processes in Africa. It discusses the political economy of democracy in order to inspire the creation of popular democracy. It concludes that whereas democracy can bring new hopes and anxieties for the African people, its leaders and the emerging democratic governments must support the establishment of civil society to cement the need for pluralism and multi-party politics on the continent. Also, it encourages each sovereign state to respect the rule of law, human rights and allow the private enterprise system to prosper.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Not since the golden decade of independence in the 1960s has the theme of democratization in Africa been debated as in recent years. The nature of politics in Africa is changing so fast to the extent that even close observers, including direct participants, speak of a new era for democracy and political reconciliation, or the coming of a "second independence" (Crocker, 1992; Legum, 1990). The major thrust of the current literature suggests that, while the anti-colonial struggles united the African people, the organizations of civil society, and the political leadership under the umbrella of freedom, these same segments of the body politic are now in a precarious balance with each other (Rothchild & Chazan, 1988), because of active hostility between social classes, rulers and the ruled (Guyer, 1992).

This analysis draws from some theoretical and practical issues that emerge with connection to democracy and civil society, in order to examine the democratization processes in Africa. It also discusses the political economy of democracy in order to inspire the creation of popular democracy. It concludes that whereas democracy can bring new hopes and anxieties for the African people, its leaders and democratic governments that develop must encourage the creation of civil society to cement the need for pluralism and multi-party politics in Africa.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC IDEALS AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

The term democracy had long been in general use and comes from the Greek phrase “*demos kratia*” meaning “the people power.” From this meaning, democracy as a form of government gives power or authority to the people. The question that confronts most scholars of democracy (Parenti, 1995; O'Connor & Sabato, 1997; Reisinger, 1997a) is how and to whom is this power given? To the Greeks who invented the word and practice, democracy meant popular power by those with skills, assets and stakes in politics different from those economic or military elites that usually ruled. Despite different concepts of democracy, the trend in contemporary advanced democracies has been to allow almost all-eligible adults the right to vote in competitive elections.

In retrospect, the modern idea of democracy, as a broad social ideal, includes “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” as expressed in the popular cry of the French Revolution of 1789. It is impossible, however, to achieve complete political equality for an average citizen without the creation of a condition of inequality. By the same token, if full political equality is assured, the liberty of a citizen to develop his or her intellectual and other resources may be impaired. Therefore, liberty and equality seem to be antithetical concepts at best. By the application of fraternity, reconciliation between liberty and equality can also be accomplished. While it is essential to examine the theme of negative and positive liberty in future research, it is pertinent to note here, as Friedman (1962, p. 2) reminds us, that “Freedom is a rare and delicate plant.”

Democracy as noted by Jacobsen and Lipman (1965), implies equality of participation in the power to determine the major issues of public policy, that is, universal suffrage. They further maintained that “equality in suffrage is meaningless unless it is accompanied by liberty to exercise a genuine choice, by secret ballot, among candidates or measures” (1965, p. 25). Liberty as expressed here implies free access by the eligible voter to sources of information including but not limited to freedom of speech and of the press, freedom of petitions and of assembly as well as freedom from arrest for political opinions. Whereas an individual acting alone may exert little or no political influence, democracy connotes freedom to organize political parties and activities. Like any other form of governance, democracy requires political parties to freely criticize and oppose the policy of the ruling party; to influence others whenever possible that the government's policy is not being well implemented or malfunctioning; and to offer both alternative policies as well as alternative slates of candidates for the government. Also, democracy implies fairly frequent elections and the acceptance of majority decisions as the “rule of the game.”

Besides the above, modern democracy requires that in order to safeguard liberty and equality that there must be a constitution either written (as in the United States) or unwritten (as in the Great Britain) to limit governmental power. The constitution must be designed to protect individuals from unnecessary government interference through the provision of the rule of law and due process. Thus, the basic concepts of democracy are that

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the individual is an end and that government is a means, but certainly not the only means, of accomplishing the fullest development for all citizens, irrespective of race, color, gender, belief or ethnic affiliation.

The prevailing theory in political science, as Sarfo (1991) reminds us, is that liberal democracy requires a developed economy with a substantial middle class that possesses the knowledge, wealth and time to organize groups which can influence government decisions pertaining to essential interests of civil society. Other scholars (e.g., Molutsi & Holm, 1990) contend that certain traditional political cultures (excluding the United States and India) may sustain the essential linkages between civil society and government in order to extend the continuing existence of liberal democracy.

In the context of Molutsi and Holm's (1990) contention, the discussion of civil society and democratization in Africa is paramount. To be sure, this begs the question of what is civil society? While civil society's exact nature may still be difficult to establish especially in the case of Africa (Post, 1991), Keane (1988, p. 3) defined it as "the realm of social—privately owned, market-directed, voluntarily run or friendship-based—activities which are legally recognized and guaranteed by the state." Reisinger (1997b) correctly observes that Keane's definition suggests that a nation's civil society may contain two definite parts. The first component includes non-governmental economic activities in which businesses and individuals compete against each other, usually referred to as the private sector. Proponents of this type of civil society, according to Reisinger, emphasize the autonomy, privacy, and liberty of citizens. The second consists of all the various activities that people are involved in and the associations that they form with their fellow members of society without any interference by the state or government. This second component is celebrated by the people not as the source of competition but as the source of community for individuals. It is pertinent to note here that "state" and "government" are used interchangeably in this analysis.

Both dimensions of civil society, in Reisinger's (1997b) view, can serve democracy well as check and balance mechanism for state institutions that may otherwise take on authoritarian or totalitarian characteristics. The private economic sphere produces a non-governmental means of acquiring status and influence over the state, which restricts the ability of government leaders to exclude certain groups, ideas, or policies from the polity, thereby restricting popular rule (Ware, 1987) or the people power as earlier discussed. In fact, the presence of civil society discourages even a dominating state from manipulating society, as it desires. Hence each member of society will be connected to and supported by his or her friends, families, colleagues and organization members. An excellent and detailed discussion of this is furnished by Reisinger (1997b) in his analysis of four general approaches to the study of democratization.

## DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESSES: STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY REVISITED

The initiation of democratization processes has become a prerequisite for the continuation of economic and other forms of assistance from the advanced democracies to Africa. While most scholars would agree with the definition of democracy as delineated earlier in this discussion, others (Ake, 1991; Anyang'Nyong'o, 1987 & 1992; Imam, 1992; Bayart, 1993) have emphasized the universality of democracy, and the centrality of human rights to the concept of democracy. Fatton (1992) suggests that any new framework in understanding African politics should be predicated upon a class analysis that shows the hegemonic power of the ruling class and the dialectical interaction of state and civil society. This suggestion attracts support on the basis of the interconnectedness of African culture, power, production, exchange and consumption relations.

The current democratization processes in Africa signifies the resurgence and emergence of multiple party system based on ethno-regional, corporatist, class and sometimes individual interests rather than ideology. Most scholars attribute this development to lack of democratic culture, and still others blame colonial masters for lack of political stability in the continent. Upon independence, many African countries adopted political reforms designed to liberalize politics and governance, but these efforts turned into authoritarian rather than democratic polities in some instances.

What seems to be the remedy for African political instability? The answer as Fatton (1990, p. 455) succinctly puts it, is that "the development of democratic mechanisms of accountability and representation is the means by which Africa can arrest its descent into hell and squalor." Another question is which countries are more likely to adopt democratic ideals? Anyang'Nyong'o (1992) points out that the former British colonies (especially those unaffected by military rule) like Tanzania and Malawi are the most reluctant to adopt democratic structures. It is important to note here that political activity in Tanzania was restricted to the ruling Revolutionary Party until February 1992 when it agreed to compete with other "national parties." Despite the return of multiparty democracy in Tanzania, the persecution of dissidents persists, and freedom of association, assembly, and speech continue to be heavily regulated. Citizens in other areas where basic human rights have been ignored or stripped off tend to merely agree to these rights and sometimes accept the status quo very reluctantly.

Conversely, French colonies have experienced a relatively more positive adjustment toward democratic governance. What accounts for this success? According to Nyang'oro (1994), the phenomenon of the *national conference* seems to be the main catalyst for the success of democratization within the Francophone countries. In the national conference, a broad coalition of the civil society invests itself with sovereign and supreme constitutional powers. It appoints transitional government with a dual executive. The president is reduced to a mere figurehead because of the limited power given to the position. A prime minister is elected by the conference as the manager of the transition under the authority and guidance of a provisional legislative assembly (as the Supreme Council of the



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Republic). Also, it organizes local, legislative and presidential elections within one year resulting in the installation of democratically-elected Head of State. This type of process occurred in places like Benin, Congo (Brazzaville), Mali, and Niger. The program collapsed in Togo and Congo (Kinshasa, formerly known as Zaire) in mid-process and has been unsuccessfully demanded by the opposition movements in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Madagascar and Mauritania.

The relevance of this phenomenon, one might add, is not based on the number of national conferences but rather it is the level of support that they attracted from the citizens in those countries and from the French government. It also demonstrates the success of regime change through a national conference predicated upon the African village meeting tradition (expanded at the national level). In former British colonies such as Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia, "the focus of struggles has not been the convening of national conferences, but rather on longstanding pressure via established groups in society such as trade unions and the like" (Nyang'oro, 1994, p. 142).

As Robinson (1994) observes, "The appeal of civil society as an organizing concept is not puzzling. Indeed, there is widespread agreement across a range of theoretical perspectives that political accountability is an essential condition for democracy, and that the degree of accountability depends upon the capacity of a robust, autonomous civil society to curb the hegemony of the state" (1994, p. 44). The decline of civil society in Africa immediately following independence prompts most scholars of African politics to question the existence of democracy in the continent. In view of the various political reforms, the meaning of democracy or what it should accomplish became the major concern. According to Newbury (1994, p. 1), "the real impetus for change arises from internal struggles which have been incubating for decades." Inherent in these struggles are concerns for the lack of adequate representation in the political system, the denial of freedom of speech and assembly, and the unavailability of socioeconomic factors to improve the peoples' standard of living. Real democracy, it is argued, allows the state to accept its role and responsibilities in meeting the welfare of the people (see Imam, 1992; Robinson, 1994).

Another concern for scholars of African politics pertains to the question of whether or not the introduction of liberal democracy will eliminate authoritarian regime politics. The recent proliferation of civil society has been cited as a possible mechanism which concerned citizens can use to remedy their problems and ensure a smooth democratic transition. This is because political actors based in civil society always advance democracy not by harshly criticizing the government, but by engaging the state as interest groups for the purpose of influencing the public policy process (Robinson, 1994).

In recent decades, civil society has witnessed an increasing role from African women in countries grappling with democratic ideals. These women feel that civil society provides them with a venue where they can organize to help shed light on their own political agendas that have been neglected for quite some time. While their collective efforts are still modest, Newbury (1994) argues that women's groups in countries like Uganda and Tanzania are on the periphery of narrow definitions of the political thought. This is because these

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informal associations at least in most cases, are often created for economic empowerment of women and thus must be separated from major political ideologies.

Notwithstanding their unorthodox procedures and methods, the presence of women's groups indicates that there is an effort to remedy the negative stigma attached to the validity of females and their concerns in the political process. Also, these groups "raise the salience of suppressed voices and force consideration of whether there can be effective governance without gender equality in the realm of political life" (Robinson, 1994, p. 50).

As a positive mechanism for regime change in the democratization processes, civil society can give the oppressed a voice among myriads of political events regardless of whether the issue at stake pertains to ethnic, religious, women or other societal problems.

In reconceptualizing how African citizens can appropriately control their societies, Imam (1992, p.103) suggests that:

multi-partyism is insufficient without the existence of substantial autonomy for civil society; that is to say, the increase in the capacity for social actors (trade unions, mass media, women, peasants, professional and other associations, entrepreneurs, etc.) and individuals to act without undue restrictions, whether from the state or in authoritarian practices in their own organizations.

It is essentially important to mention here that democratic theory requires the state not only to tolerate, but also to encourage the formation of interest groups to enable them to play their role in democratic politics in general and in the public policy process in particular.

## **THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DEMOCRACY**

The debate on democratization in Africa is always accompanied by the daunting question of economic liberalization. The dismal failure of authoritarian regimes in the 1990s in countries such as Algeria, Nigeria and elsewhere to furnish any measure of economic development compels scholars to revisit the old argument about the relation between democracy and development (see Anyang'Nyong'o, 1992; Martin, 1994). In fact, Africa sees itself at the crossroad of trying to implement democratic ideals and economic reforms imposed on them by International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and Western aid donors as prerequisites for economic recovery assistance. Also, the increased frustrations among many Africans come from the fact that the leaders who took over the control of government apparatus after independence including military dictators have not only looted Africa's wealth but almost ruined its economy (Ugorji, 1996).

Classical modernization theory as it emerges in the study of democratization posits that economic development and social mobility would lead to equality, stability and democracy. Although this theory has been disproved on the basis of developing countries'

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experience with democratization (e.g., Adelman & Hihn, 1984), its proponents argue that, *ceteris paribus*, democratic institutions are more likely to be created in a society with certain socioeconomic prerequisites. If democratic institutions are established in a society that is not ready for democratic governance, “they are more likely to fail, producing a return to authoritarian rule” (Reisinger, 1997b, p. 55).

The issue of equality in the international political economy worries most African leaders and academics alike. In his *The History of West Africa*, a book that is likely to be influential in any discussion of dominance-dependency argument, Abiola (1971) shows how the imperial powers of Europe depleted African economy and replaced it with monopoly capitalism as a matter of policy and not competitive capitalism. Also, the realities of the dominance-dependency relations in modern capitalist world system have been shown by Anunobi (1994), in his *International Dimensions of African Political Economy*, to be responsible for the continent’s structural dependency. Even the first president of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe, agreed that “Colonialism interrupted normal African economic development, capitalism denied Africa of its wealth and imperialism deprived Africa of its birthright” (quoted in Anunobi, 1994, p. 63).

Despite scholars claims that foreign actors have played a substantial role in African politics and conflicts since independence, the time has come for Africans to not only accept the new reality of global interdependence, but to forge ahead and discover its place in the international geopolitical sphere. This discovery will help Africa to develop its economy as well as ripe the fruits of global comparative advantage. While economic development would lead to a partial shift toward income equality for the possible creation of a large middle class required for successful democratization, African leaders and intellectuals must learn, and teach its citizens both traditional and modern civic responsibilities. Also, the South African “consolidated” democracy seems to be a model that can be deployed in some countries. Consolidation as Griffiths (1998, p. 427) writes “involves the polity’s acceptance of democratic processes, the establishment of the rule of law, institutional reform, the emergence of civil and political society, and economic progress.”

## CONCLUSIONS

While scholars tend to disagree on how Africa can proceed with the democratization process, the general consensus centers on the idea that each nation must follow the route that works well for the sovereign, as an autonomous entity. The reality is that most African countries will continue to change as different models of democracy are experimented upon, discarded and even reintroduced. Despite the fact that the historical background of the continent, including colonialism may signal some clues about the drive toward democratization, it might not be the best answer for the peoples’ socioeconomic problems. The question of whether democracy is realizable in Africa is no longer a tenuous one whose answers might be uncertain. This author believes that the democratic model that works best in the continent



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is one that borrows from the African traditional way of governance, town meeting type of policy formation and problem solving—extended to the national level. This African democratic method is now being dubbed in most intellectual discourse as sovereign national conferences. The sovereign national conference fosters citizen participation (as in the United States of America) and nurtures a new sense of political culture. Since it worked in countries such as Benin, in West Africa, and South Africa, in Southern Africa, it will hopefully work in other regions of the continent. A variant of this model (a process of change that began in mid-1991) is being implemented in Ethiopia and about to be experimented in Nigeria under the stewardship of General Abdusalaami Abubakar. The success of the local elections in December of 1998 is indicative that Abubakar is serious about political reforms aimed at returning his country to democratic rule in May 1999.

For most scholars of African politics, irrespective of their stance on the ideological spectrum, capitalism and democracy are interrelated (Anunobi, 1994; Khapoya, 1994; Ake, 1991; Sarfo, 1991). Capitalism in its fullest force generates a reward system that encourages individuals to accumulate as much wealth as they can possibly amass. It sees the free market as the most efficient and even fairest method for the allocation of rewards. Conversely, whenever the market works, democracy comes in to protect the scarce resources and restricting the economic oppressions that benefit the privileged few. Democracy allocates roughly equal value to all and seeks to ensure that those disadvantaged by wealth or with gifted skills can earn a decent living (Parenti, 1995). A cautionary note is important here given the perspective expressed in the political economy of democracy. While democracy has triumphed for the moment in many countries of the modern world, its triumphalism as Berger (1992) warns is unwarranted. History itself tells us that there is no “end to history,” it continues to make itself as long as there are people to record events. The failure of African leaders to generate incomes in their respective countries would certainly threaten to undermine democracy by promoting or provoking harsh and divisive conditions of ethno-regional conflict. African people must give civil society a chance to develop and function. It is hoped that both economic and political stability will return to the continent if each sovereign state respects rule of law, human rights and allows the private enterprise system to prosper.

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